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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study that used WebCT Bulletin Board, a program for breaking down geographical barriers to collaborating in distance education. Participants were preservice teachers, mentor physical educators, and university professors. WebCT was used to support electronic bulletin board communication. Students utilized WebCT's internal homepage development feature. Creation of homepages provided participants with a vehicle for learning and established a sense of community. Students and mentors were encouraged to access homepages and learn more about their online peers. Students selected another student with whom to exchange e-mail messages. Every 3 weeks, a university professor posted a case study and guided questions. Participants were encouraged to respond to the cases and questions by posting replies. Data sources for the project included responses to case studies, interactions between students and mentors, and survey results upon completing the project. Overall, students found electronic interaction a meaningful, enjoyable experience, though some expressed frustration with utilizing WebCT. Students considered WebCT easy to use and believed this type of teaching should continue in the future. Students enjoyed the general forum, with all messages posted to one main site, while mentors preferred small group forums. Mentors were extremely positive about using WebCT to communicate with students. (SM)

Using WebCT Bulletin Board Option to Extend Transitional Classroom Walls

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"Rapid technology development makes education no longer confined to a walled classroom" (Leh, 1999, p. 212). Typically, early distance education attempts incorporated instructional delivery systems which supported one-way asynchronous communication (Kirby, 1999). The recent trend toward computer based distance learning courses has created a niche for course software programs that provide tools oriented to support interactivity. These programs (i.e., WebCT, Blackboard) allow an instructor to convert their course into an web-based platform. WebCT was used for this project and allowed students and mentors to interact using course tools such as internal email, chat groups, and bulletin board.

Uniqueness of the Project

The uniqueness of the Bulletin Board project included breaking down geographical barriers to collaborate and communicate. Participating students were from two universities, mentors represented all regions of the country, and the lead investigators have never met (except through e-mail). We feel what really makes this project truly unique is that all the participants were brought together through the power of technology. Mentors and the collaborating university were solicited by using e-mail and then communicated with one another using WebCT an Internet communication tool. This project models and demonstrates a unique experience that we, as educators, can provide our students that go beyond our traditional classrooms.

Methodology

Project participants included undergraduate teacher education majors at two universities (n=44), mentor physical educators (n=21) and two university professors. WebCT was the software package used to support the electronic bulletin board communication. In addition to the electronic bulletin board students utilized WebCT's internal homepage development feature. Creation of homepages was intended to provide participants with a vehicle for learning and to establish a sense of community. All of the project participants completed the homepages within the first two weeks of the project. Students and mentors were also encouraged to access the homepages and learn more about their online peers. Additionally students were to select another student with whom they would exchange email messages in order to learn more about them and to establish a feeling of community.

The bulletin board project was designed to provide the college students with an experience beyond the traditional classroom and with the opportunity to professionally network. Gamas and Solberg (1997) studied the use of electronic communication tools in five separate university courses. Their methods section suggested the use of professor posted messages to electronic bulletin board to begin the interactions. This same strategy was used in our study. Approximately every three weeks throughout the semester the professor at the Midwestern University site posted a case study and guided questions (collaboratively

developed between professors) to the main forum. Participants were encouraged to respond to the cases and questions by posting a message in reply to the case. Topics included cases on the coaching issues, drug/steroid use, student teaching loyalty, and establishing boundaries with students. Participants were encouraged to discuss their opinions on the main forum.

Data Sources

Data sources for this project included participant responses to the case studies, interactions between undergraduate students and mentors, and survey results upon completion of the project. Qualitative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) were used to document and describe the process of identifying emerging themes. To organize analysis of data sources, the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches of structuralism were enlisted. Structuralism views "documents" as "texts" (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 467). As such, once the data was accumulated in written form, it was read through several times. With each reading a set of tentative themes developed. The emerging themes and issues arising from the readings created the codes or interpretive frames that guided and structured the analysis. Trends and commonalities informed researcher understandings of participants perspectives on the case study issues. Finally, the surveys provided information concerning the attitudes of the participants toward the value and perceived gains of connecting undergraduates with mentors in an effort to discuss teaching issues.

Students' Reflections

Overall, the students found interacting electronically with others to be a meaningful experience. The majority of the students truly enjoyed having the opportunity to exchange ideas and views with others from outside of the classroom. However, a number of the students did express frustration with utilizing WebCT. They indicated that initially in the project they had difficulty navigating through the bulletin board options and accessing a computer. But, despite some of the their frustrations, the students overwhelming support having the project continued for future classes. Also, a number of the students reported that the project provided them with vital computer and Internet experiences that they needed. To affirm the project's potential impact on students, one student expressed her gratitude for having the opportunity to participate in the project in these words. "I get scared a little thinking of what the future holds, is teaching the right profession for me, where will I end up, but after talking with the mentors and students, I know that teaching is what I want and is the profession for me. They give me strength to strive for greater heights and become a teacher of ethics; as well as be "SUCCESSFUL!!!"

Results & Discussion

A total of 205 messages were posted to the bulletin board throughout the semester. In addition to the messages posted 3054 messages were read during this same time period. This seems to indicate that while numerous individuals were reading messages they did not post or respond to every message they read. Students from the midwest university averaged 8 postings, students from the southwestern university averaged 5 postings, and mentors posted approximately 3 times each.

Information from the surveys was averaged to compare the mean scores for each question. Three main concepts emerged from the survey data. Students believed that use of the bulletin board was easy. Furthermore, they believed that use of the bulletin board should

continue for future sections of the course. Finally, participants seemed to enjoy the use of the general forum where all messages were posted to one main site compared to previous studies where participants were placed in small group forums. It was interesting to note however that the mentors were in favor of small group forums. Mentors also were extremely positive concerning the use of the bulletin board feature to communicate with preservice teachers.

Participants had an opportunity to respond to an open ended question which probed them to share any additional perspectives. This provided interesting and valuable information to the researchers. As one student stated "I liked the fact that we could communicate with another school". However, not all comments were positive and several focused on the content of the case studies. "The questions that were posted never really made me think". Several students believed that since the case studies did not cause them to think that interactions on the bulletin board "felt like a chore".

Positive findings indicated that technology problems and barriers were minimized with the use of one general forum as compared to several small group forums. Requiring the students as part of a course and attaching an academic reward to the tasks tended to create greater accountability. And finally students did respond and interact with the case studies.

Implications for Physical Education

The utilization of software packages (i.e., WebCT, Blackboard) to create web-based educational environments provide asynochronous methods for preservice teachers to establish and maintain professional contacts within a secured and controlled environment. These environments provide opportunities for both young professionals and inservice teachers' to exchange views and ideas from different geographical locations. However, proper support (i.e., training & reference materials) must be provided to ensure successful dialogue among participants. If proper dialogue is established among participants, their understanding of the differences and similarities within our profession regarding our beliefs, values, struggles, and strengths is enhanced. Furthermore, both preservice and inservice teachers' computer skills are enhanced and they are modeled how technology can be effectively integrated into physical education. It's the investigators' view that preservice teachers who are exposed to and taught how to integrate technology are more likely to successfully infuse technology into their own classrooms. Therefore, it is the responsibility of physical education teacher preparation programs to assist future and current physical educators in developing their technology skills and modeling how technology can be successfully integrated into the physical education curriculum.

Future Directions

Results from this study were encouraging and stimulated ideas for future directions for the project. It would be valuable to solicit additional universities and mentors to participate in the project. Increasing the number of individuals might enhance the communication process and stimulate greater thoughtfulness. Increasing the number of case studies might also provide for a more dynamic environment where information is constantly changing compared to the more measure style used in this study. Instructors whose students are interacting on the web site should supplement the cases with in class discussion to further challenge student beliefs and attitudes toward school issues. Another thought might be to assign specific email pals rather than allowing the students to select their communication buddy. This would allow for more accountability and reduce the confusion that was

experienced at the onset of the messaging. A final thought might be to have a designated mentor be assigned the role of "devils advocate" to respond to the questions in a style that would make the students respond emotionally to the topics being discussed on the bulletin board.

In conclusion, the results from this project will add to the collective knowledge of mentoring and technology implementation at the university teacher preparation level. It is our hope that it provides insights concerning teachers experiences in school settings versus the idealized perspectives of the undergraduate students who have never taught a course with "real students in real schools".

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